



Photo: Alejandra Vargas Garcia

Reducing child marriage and increasing girls' schooling in Bangladesh

Evidence shows how even a small incentive can delay marriage for girls, while a well-designed empowerment program can prolong their education.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Child marriage stubbornly persists in South Asia, despite being associated with lower education, higher fertility and mortality rates, and poor health among adolescent mothers and their children. According to the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2014, 59% of women aged 20-24 were married before the age of 18, and 31% of girls age 15-19 had begun childbearing. The parents of child brides are frequently mischaracterized as "ignorant" or "uncaring", when in fact, impoverished parents are forced to make difficult choices between what is best for their daughters and what they can afford. In Bangladesh, as a girl ages, the dowry price her parents must pay for her marriage increases, while her prospects of being able to afford a suitable spouse may diminish.

KEY RESULTS

- Incentives for unmarried girls delayed marriage and childbirth, and prolonged school attendance.
- Empowerment programming extended girls' education, but did not significantly delay marriage.
- Incentives for unmarried girls benefited girls out of school as well as those attending.
- There was no observed advantage of combining incentives with empowerment programming.



Photo: Dr. Elizabeth Linos

Child marriage and dowry payments are deeply rooted practices, and difficult to repress by legal means. Among the alternative strategies that have been tested to discourage early marriage, providing financial incentives conditional on school attendance has shown some success. However, these incentives do little to address the problem of child marriage among girls outside the school system. There is also some evidence that empowerment and skills training for young women may delay marriage and childbearing, but there have been few rigorous studies to date on the long-term impact of such programs.

To better inform the design of interventions to reduce child marriage and adolescent childbearing, researchers conducted a long-term study in rural Bangladesh that evaluated the impact of two very different approaches — an adolescent empowerment training program and a conditional incentives program. This brief highlights some of the findings of the evaluation of these programs, with an aim to inform policymakers in Bangladesh and other countries in South Asia on effective, and cost-efficient, ways to reduce child marriage.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Between January 2007 and September 2015, researchers ran a randomized trial in collaboration with Save the Children (USA) in six sub-districts of south central Bangladesh. The researchers randomly assigned sample villages to receive: i) a girls' empowerment program; ii) a financial incentive to delay marriage; iii) a combination of the empowerment program and the incentive; and iv) no programming (control group).

The incentive program, which ran from May 2008 to August 2010, used the distribution infrastructure of an existing food security program operated by Save the Children in all communities in the study. In communities offered the conditional incentive, families of unmarried girls aged 15-17 were eligible to receive USD16 worth of cooking oil each year until their daughters reached the age of 18 or married. Cooking oil was chosen as an incentive because it is purchased by all families — and so is equivalent to giving cash — but is easier to track than cash. The value of USD16/year was chosen to offset the higher dowry cost associated with delayed marriage.

In communities receiving the empowerment program, all girls aged 10-19 were invited to take part in one of four six-month cycles of Kishoree Kontha ("Adolescent Girl's Voice"), a peer education program that ran between December 2007 and August 2010. The curriculum included educational and social competency components designed to teach girls about the dangers of early marriage, help them with school work, and equip them to negotiate with their parents when told it was time to marry. The education component aimed to enhance the basic literacy, numeracy, and oral communication of both school-attending and non-attending girls. The social competency component focused on life skills and nutritional and reproductive health knowledge.

Four-and-a-half years after program completion, a follow-up survey of all participants was conducted on the girls' marital status, school attendance, and childbearing history. Attrition was low (15%) given the length of the study. As attrition did not differ between treatment groups, results are assumed to be valid for the entire sample. The analysis sample consists of 19,059 girls from 446 communities.

RESULTS

Incentives for unmarried girls delayed marriage and childbirth, and prolonged school attendance.

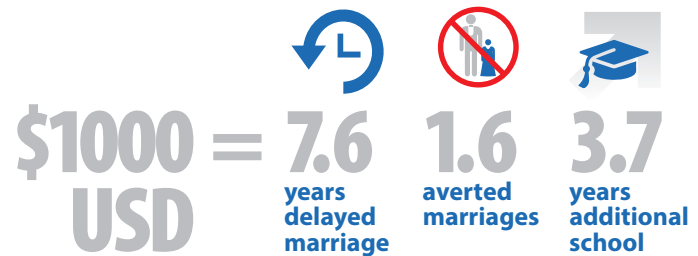
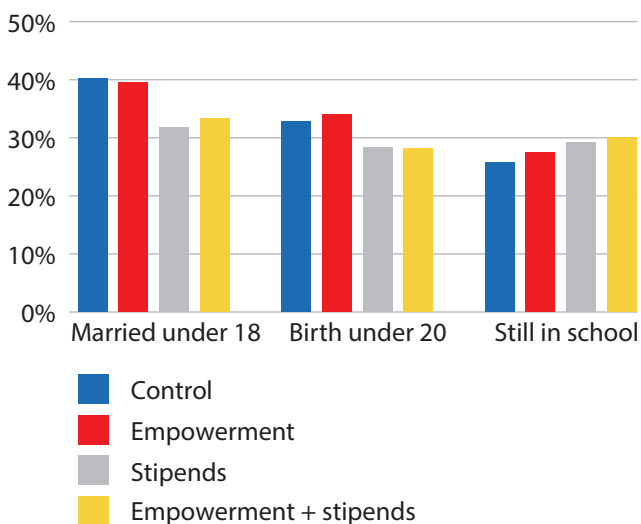
Girls who remained eligible to receive the oil stipend for the full two-year period were 22% less likely to have married before the age of 18 than girls in the control group. Even more importantly, the incentive appeared to have a lasting effect, with marriage rates between the incentive and control groups not converging until age 22. Furthermore, the reduction in child marriage resulted in 14% fewer teenage births among girls who received the stipend. Girls aged 15-17 at the program start who received the incentive were also 14% more likely to be in school at age 22-25.

Empowerment programming extended girls' education, but did not significantly delay marriage.

Girls who attended the empowerment program were 7% more likely to be in school at age 22-25 and had completed 2.4 months more schooling than those in the control group. The program did not, however, have any significant impact on marriage age. There may yet be benefits in terms of lower fertility, as the empowerment program increased girls' knowledge of contraception. The empowerment effect was stronger for girls who were 15 at the start of the intervention. Among this age group, girls were 11% more likely to be in school and they completed 3.0 additional months on average.

Group means after programs

(girls age 15 to 17 at program start)



Every 1000 USD spent on the stipend program in this study, translated into delayed marriage by 7.6 years and 3.7 additional years of schooling.

Incentives for unmarried girls benefited those out of school as well as those in school.

Unlike incentive programs that are conditional on girls staying in school, one that is conditional only on delayed marriage has the potential to benefit out-of-school girls. The incentive decreased the likelihood of child marriage by 12% among girls out of school when the study started, compared with 27% among girls in school. Those who were out of school at program launch were 8% less likely to give birth in their teen years than those in the control group, while those in school were 18% less likely to have given birth.

There was no observed advantage of combining incentives with empowerment programming.

Child marriage rates were the same in communities that received the incentive and empowerment program as they were in the incentive only communities. Similarly, there was no complementarity between the two programs in all specifications, meaning that the combined effect was always equal to the sum of the individual effects.

LESSONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

These results complement the growing literature suggesting that incentives can help change behaviors that have persisted for many years, are culturally-rooted, and may appear strongly entrenched.

A small conditional incentive provides a cost-effective counter to early marriage.

Despite the complex cultural factors surrounding child marriage, affordable and rapid progress is possible. A small stipend appears to help parents facing hard choices feel more confident about waiting for another eligible marriage proposal, giving their daughter time to grow, receive more education, and become an adult before marriage. In this study, every USD1,000 spent on the stipend program (including stipends, transportation, distribution, monitoring, and administration) translated into 7.6 years of delayed marriage, 1.6 averted child marriages, and 3.7 years of additional schooling, making it the most cost-effective child marriage prevention program reviewed.

Making incentives conditional on marriage status rather than schooling extends the benefits more widely.

Most incentive programs focus on keeping girls in school and thus exclude out-of-school girls, perhaps on the assumption that, once out of school, a girl will inevitably marry and be beyond the reach of policies or programs. Incentives conditional on education thus fail to help the most vulnerable girls. Trial results show that a financial incentive conditional on marriage delay — not education — benefits out-of-school girls, buying them precious time for their bodies and minds to mature before marriage and childbirth.

Investments in girls' empowerment can extend schooling, even if they do not delay marriage.

While the well-crafted and intensive adolescent girls' empowerment program tested in this trial did not decrease child marriage or childbearing, it was effective in increasing schooling. It is possible that the empowerment program and these added months of school will translate into gains in reproductive health outcomes or marital bargaining power later in a woman's life. Furthermore, empowerment programs may be more effective in settings where girls have some agency over marriage timing.

This brief presents findings and policy lessons identified in a paper prepared jointly by researchers from Duke University, Harvard University, Innovations for Poverty Action, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology through the GrOW program. See "The effect of conditional incentives and a girls' empowerment curriculum on adolescent marriage, childbearing and education in rural Bangladesh: A community clustered randomized controlled trial" (2017) by Nina Buchmann, Erica Field, Rachel Glennerster, Shahana Nazneen, Svetlana Pimkina, and Iman Sen.

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